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## The Orbiting Vessel

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*The Orbiting Vessel*  
Chelsea Lawson

*“WE DANCE ROUND THE CIRCLE AND SUPPOSE, THE SECRET SITS IN THE  
MIDDLE AND KNOWS.” –Robert Frost*

I shift my weight to one side as I prepare to read the morning news. My wooden porch swing I purchased from the Amish last week makes for a comfortable reading setting. The kitchen table is still piled with miscellaneous boxed items that I’ve been planning to sort out for weeks after moving. I’m in no rush. There’s a world outside my doorstep with fresher air and a river nesting a bellyful of fish. I’d much rather be casting and reeling than sorting and organizing. With my glass of V8 Splash in my hand, I spread out the morning paper across my lap.

I was never a front page reader. The bleeding lead stories put a damper on my day. I also never appreciated the fact that stories are treated as less important if they do not occur within a fifty mile radius of this small quaint town. Anything outside of this range comprises a four or five line blurb on the corner of the back page. These are the stories that I often search and fill in the blanks to counteract the brevity of its coverage. Today’s concise story’s headline reads: *Ottawa Father Drowns Despite his Daughter’s Efforts*. It goes on to state that

the father and daughter were at a Ramada Inn swimming pool when the father, injured from a fall off of a diving board, lost consciousness. The daughter jumped in to save him but nearly drowned herself. The father died and the daughter was later taken to the nearest hospital.

I pause at the punctuated period at the end of the page. Is this all that can be said about the traumatized daughter? It is all that can be printed in black and white anyway. The public still needs to hold down their Cheerios while going about their everyday crises of petty inconveniences or overbooked schedules. I set the newspaper beside me on the porch swing and close my eyes. It is my father that I hear calling to me. “Jump in,” he yells. I imagine the Ottawa father telling his daughter the same thing when they first arrive at the pool. It is unfortunate that my sweet memory of swimming is not reciprocated in hers.

I remember the chlorine puncturing my nose as I neared the counterfeit blue’s surface. The orange balloons encircling my forearms gave me the wobbly gait of an awkward fledgling. I lowered my 4’2” frame to the water’s edge. Concentric circles diffused from my stubby finger.

Test.

“Jump in!” Daddy yelled.

Being the third child, I was not an egg carried delicately on a spoon like my

older brother and sister. A band-aid could cure any ailment and so could a hickory switch if needed.

Daddy stood in the center of the rectangle, engulfed mid-waist by this monster. His legs looked as stumpy as mine from the elevated ledge.

“Go on, Chelsea. It won’t bite you,” Mama said, unfolded on a beach towel and peering over her Ann Rule book. I questioned their consensus until his arms outstretched, waiting for my leap. No more hesitating.

*Splash!*

Daddy looked down at the carrot marshmallows swallowing my upper limbs. “Why did Mama make you wear these? Water dogs like us don’t need floaties,” he said grinning as he slipped the bulky contraptions off, freeing me into the water’s embrace. I kicked my legs like good water dogs do, but quickly began to sink.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he assured me. “Just relax.”

He supported me with both hands under my belly, extending me out into the blue liquid jello, tethering me to safety or the illusion of it. I stopped my struggle with gravity and became parallel to the water’s white cemented base. I was weightless.

Accepted.

Equal.

The sun peaked through the clouds, piercing holes through the water's surface and absorbing into the fabric of my black Mickey Mouse bathing suit. There was no leniency from the jealous sky whose breeze was kept locked tight, only to be released for little girls who paid visits with their flying kites.

"It's hot, Daddy," I said, furrowing my brow as I peered up at the relentless sun.

"Oh, you're hot, eh? I can change that." He grabbed my left arm with one hand, my left leg with the other. "You wanna see how a motorboat moves?" he asked. I nodded my head and he slowly rotated me around him in counterclockwise circles.

"They start out verrrry slllloooowww liiike thisssss," he rumbled in a deep voice. "Then...." he paused. I anxiously waited. "They go real fast!" he yelled, swinging me around and around, his body, a pivot, my body, a motorboat whirring across the water at top-notch speed. I laughed uncontrollably as waves sloshed against the tiled edges of the pool. He stopped just in time to maintain equilibrium. When we caught our breath, the water quelled around us, I looked up at my motorboat conductor and saw my reflection smiling back at me through his black metallic shades.

I open my eyes and look back down at the rolled up newspaper. Is this how the

daughter in Canada's day began? Was it just as similar to my own recollections? I imagine that the six year old girl was just as tentative of the water as I was, her throat constricting when she thought of submerging her face under the bottomless liquid. She probably stood on the ledge and waited for her father to come up behind her, already soaked from his dive off the board, and make his best attempt at coaxing her to join him. I imagine the Ottawa father was much like my own, who made every attempt to show his daughter that the water was harmless, only his last method was a fatal one.

I closed my eyes again and imagined him walking behind her, around the pool's perimeter, and stepping back onto the diving board as the girl envied his fearlessness. I'm sure she watched him as he bounced: Once, twice, three times. Did she know that would be the last time she saw her father smile at her? As his foot slipped from underneath him and his head bounced off the concrete shelf of the diving board, did she blame herself for not jumping in earlier?

I imagine the girl looking down at her father lying at the pool's foundation, his arms stretched in front of him as if he were reaching for her. I hear her shrieking, "Daddy! Daddy," as she looks around and sees no one but herself screaming on the reddened surface of the water.

Was it the realization that she was utterly alone that made her plunge in to

fight the water's depths? I wonder if she sank to where he was and touched him one last time before everything went black.

What was it like for the girl to wake up in a bed of asylum white, staring up at her mother without her father at her side? Did she study the pain nestled in her mother's eyes and see through the synthetic smile painted on her face? I imagine the little girl asking, "Where's Daddy?" and her mother realizing that she can no longer obscure the reality of safety for her daughter. I clench my eyes and see the mother grasping for her daughter's hand and kissing her cheek. I hear her whispering, "Daddy's in Heaven."

I jar myself and realize that I am still clenching the newspaper in my hand. The next day I feel compelled to drive across town to the setting of my fondest memory of my father. I stare fifteen years later into the same swimming pool that my father and I became the conductor and the motorboat. My reflection stretches across the water's midsection, transformed from how I remember it as a child. I walk the pool's perimeter. The depth that once daunted me seems somewhat laughable as I stand at the site of the entrance where I took my first leap. I hear the splash my body made the first time I dove into my daddy's arms and see the waves sloshing like the insides of a washing machine as we spun like whirling dervishes. The water floods over me with this memory. I stare at the vibrant blue and can't help to wonder what the little girl from Ontario sees. Is

the pool just as ominous as she remembers it? Are the waters just as red?

Fathers must prepare their children for the moving currents of life. Sometimes those currents can circulate understanding, leading to memorable experiences and unforeseen adventure. Other times, the undertow can pull you under, drowning who you were and resurfacing you as someone lost in struggle to survive. Despite the precarious unknown, a father knows that his job is to prepare his children. His power does not reside where the waters flow downstream, but he is there for the first submersion, sink or swim. I reflect on what my father has taught me: how to ride a bike, how to skip rocks, how to ward off bullies, and most importantly, how to swim. I wonder how much of that I would have learned on my own. Did the Ottawa girl teach herself any of these things? It is with a leap my father cradled me, and it is with a leap, her father taught her how to cradle herself.